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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

18 March 1971

MEMORANDUM*

SUBJECT: Some Thoughts on a Rightist Takeover in Laos

NOTE

Although a rightist coup in Laos appears unlikely at present, the possibility of such a development at some point should not be totally discounted. This paper, therefore, discusses the considerations that might lead the rightists to mount a coup and the reactions of the communists thereto.

Souvanna, Laotian "Neutrality" and the Rightists**

1. Laotian neutrality is a convenient myth. Although still believing that Laos can only survive as a neutralist state and that the Laotian communists have a role to play in the government, Souvanna has long

* This memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated within CIA.

** See Attachment for a brief description of the Laotian "right."

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since moved to the right. Over the past few years he has sanctioned increasing allied military action in Laos against the communists. This has served to attenuate rightist suspicion of Souvanna, but has not completely appeased his rightist opponents. They still suspect that Souvanna will prejudice their interests in the process of trying to deal with the communists.

2. Over the past few months, some of the key rightists in southern Laos have once again begun to talk about replacing the Souvanna government. The southerners have also dusted off the proposition of a de facto north-south partition with a working arrangement between southern Laos and its anti-communist neighbors -- Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. It is difficult to determine whether the southerners are engaging in anything more than their normal griping about the government in Vientiane. The southerners, who are as feckless as any Lao in fighting the communists (and who may actually profit from trading with them), find it convenient to blame Souvanna for Laos' plight.

3. Whatever restraint the rightists presently feel in dealing with Souvanna results primarily from an understanding that US support is contingent on the preservation of his leadership and the facade of Laotian

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neutrality.* Indeed, over the years -- and as recently as December 1970 -- the US has acted to head off or derail attempts by the rightists to move against the government in Vientiane or to undertake action against other key figures which could in turn lead to Souvanna's downfall.** Faced with this situation, the rightists have generally held back in the realization that however distasteful Souvanna might be to them, they would not want to risk US support, which is critical to the country's survival, by removing him.

4. Nonetheless, it is possible that the rightists might come to believe that the old "rules of the game" no longer apply and that the US might not really oppose a successful move to oust Souvanna. From their

* This was not always so; in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the US supported the rightists. But when it became clear that they could not wield power effectively, let alone fend off the communists, the US opted for Souvanna and a neutral approach for Laos.

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point of view, the rightists see the US backing an expanded war in Indochina, including an invasion of southern Laos, and pouring increasing resources into the fighting in northern Laos. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The Laotian rightists were encouraged by events in Cambodia, where a "neutralist" regime was ousted and the US moved quickly to render support and assistance to the new government. Finally, the rightists are apprehensive over the gradual whittling away of the territory held by the government. In these circumstances, the rightists might reason that they could oust Souvanna, assume power and its perquisites, and still not lose US support.

5. Let us assume then that the rightists decide at some point to move against Souvanna and that they succeed. Would they, despite their anti-communist "principles," seek to maintain the facade of Lao neutrality? Much would depend on the US. If Washington insisted that neutrality was essential, the rightists would almost certainly attempt to find someone who could be labelled a "neutralist" to front for them -- most likely Finance Minister Sisouk na Champassak. But regardless of whether an effort were made by the rightist leaders to continue the neutralist charade in Vientiane, the question would remain whether there is any one who really could play Souvanna's role. In a very basic sense, Laotian neutrality is Souvanna;

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no one else has his credentials or legitimacy, however tainted, as a neutralist. Only the shell of Laotian neutrality is left, and, like Humpty Dumpty, once broken, it probably cannot be put back together again.

The Communists and a Rightist Takeover

6. North Vietnam. Hanoi still seems to view the pretense of Laotian neutrality as worth preserving. Thus far, the communists have clearly shown that they are not willing to abandon the 1962 Geneva Agreement which established Souvanna's government and gave the Pathet Lao a role in it. Of course, the communists no longer participate in the government in Vientiane. Nonetheless, their 5-Point proposal for a political solution to the Laos problem indicates that they still are interested in resuscitating the coalition government, although under circumstances that would afford them more than minority status.

7. Indeed, for about a year, the communists and Souvanna have been attempting to get formal talks underway. The communists have been trying to get the talks organized in such a manner as to cast doubt on the legality of Souvanna's government, while Souvanna, who is under some pressure from rightist generals, has been stonewalling. But the communists seem willing, even eager, that the talks not be totally abandoned and have not broken them

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off even in the wake of the South Vietnamese invasion of southern Laos. It may well be that the communists believe that sooner or later circumstances will permit a communist re-entry into the government and that Souvanna -- despite his coziness with the US -- still hopes to bring about such an outcome.

8. The equilibrium established under the Laotian arrangement has also worked to Hanoi's tactical military advantage. Until recently, concern over maintaining the fiction of Laotian neutrality served in part to limit allied ground action in Laos. For their part, the communists were able to secure with relative ease those parts of the country deemed essential as a buffer for North Vietnam and as a corridor for movement of men and supplies to South Vietnam. As a consequence, the communists apparently have chosen to eschew an effort to overrun all of Laos, perhaps reasoning that if they were successful in South Vietnam -- the number one strategic target -- Laos would ultimately also fall under their hegemony. They have nibbled away at the territory remaining in the government's hands, including two towns in southern Laos, but in general they have exercised restraint.

9. A right-wing takeover in Laos would force Hanoi to re-evaluate its position and strategy. Hanoi would first have to decide whether, for the moment, it could live with the rightist takeover. Chances are that it could, at least so long as the advent of the southern generals did not appear

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to presage any substantial change in the military equation in Laos -- e.g., stepped-up US or Thai military support.

10. Hanoi would be particularly sensitive to the US response to the right-wing takeover. In the same vein, Hanoi would want to determine just how the rightists were going to operate; if the rightists showed a willingness to play along with the neutralist charade, Hanoi might wait and see what developed. Further, Hanoi might hold back in the belief that the new rightist regime could not long sustain itself in power and that a rapid descent into political chaos in Vientiane, with new opportunities for the communists, would be likely. Finally, Hanoi would probably prefer to avoid having to open yet another major military front in Indochina. In particular, a communist move into the Mekong Valley, where [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] US air might present formidable opposition, might be viewed in Hanoi as a costly diversion of manpower and supplies to a target clearly secondary to communist objectives in South Vietnam.

11. But there are also considerations that could lead Hanoi to adopt a more aggressive military posture in Laos. Hanoi is already concerned by the creeping increase in Thai involvement in Laos and alarmed at the US-supported South Vietnamese thrust into the heretofore sacrosanct

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Ho Chi Minh Trail area. Hanoi -- and almost everyone else -- would, initially at least, assume that the rightist takeover was a product of US connivance. As a result, Hanoi might view the rightist takeover as the final proof that the 1962 accords were no longer of value. In short, Hanoi might question whether the status quo in Laos had changed sufficiently to undercut the utility of not moving more rapidly. As a result, Hanoi might see little reason to limit its military actions and might attempt to deal a decisive blow to the rightist leadership.

12. In sum, whether the communists would maintain their relative military restraint in Laos or whether they would move quickly to attempt to gain control of as much of the country as possible cannot be answered conclusively. Much would depend on the US and its attitude toward the right-wing government in Vientiane. But in any event, the communists would be acutely sensitive to any indication that the rightist takeover was a prelude to stepped-up allied military action in Laos. If Hanoi thought this were the case, it would probably attempt to move its forces first.

13. China. Like Hanoi, Peking apparently continues to view the Souvanna regime as a potentially useful arrangement for restoring a communist political position in Vientiane and a neutral posture for Laos generally. The Chinese still seem to believe that re-establishment of the

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Lao buffer will help to ensure the security of China's own frontier. Thus, the advent of a rightist regime would raise in China the spectre of increased US or other anti-communist states' involvement in Laotian affairs, including the possibility of stepped-up military operations in northern Laos. And if Hanoi chose to adopt a hard line, so would the Chinese. Under these circumstances, Peking would probably follow Hanoi in breaking relations with the new Laotian regime and recognizing the NLHS (the political arm of the communist Pathet Lao) as the "legitimate" government of the country.

14. Peking also could be expected to raise to new heights the threat quotient in its propaganda.

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Nonetheless, unless China's borders were directly threatened, we doubt that Peking would undertake any major military adventure as a result of a right-wing takeover in Laos, though it would be quick to support whatever military counteraction Hanoi decided to undertake.

15. The USSR. Lao neutrality and the USSR's role as co-chairman (along with the UK) of the 1962 Geneva Conference have given the Soviets

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a stake in the present governmental arrangement in Laos.* Thus, a rightist takeover would present Moscow with a problem if Hanoi chose to adopt a hard line. If so, the USSR would face the same problem as in Cambodia where they have so far opted for an ambivalent posture: maintaining cool but correct relations with the regime in power. As in Cambodia, Moscow would hope that the rightists would fail quickly and that the Soviet Union could play an important role in the re-establishment of a neutralist government. To this end, the Soviets would criticize the takeover and attempt to rally international support behind any effort to restore Souvanna's leadership. But this would be a hope, not an expectation; it is doubtful that the Soviets would be optimistic about accomplishing this objective. Over the longer term, the Soviets would probably fear the worst -- that neutralism had lost out as a viable course for Laos and that they would lose more political ground to the Chinese in the competition for Hanoi's favor.

* The Soviets have recently underlined their strong support of the Souvanna government. This has been a consistent Soviet position; during the early 1960s, when the US supported the rightists, the Soviet Union was solidly behind the neutralist forces of Souvanna. Indeed, most of the supplies for the neutralists during this period were brought into the country on Soviet planes.

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Conclusion

16. On the face of it, a rightist takeover would be highly unlikely to result in any improvement in Laos' already grim prospects. The rightists would not be able to do any better than Souvanna in coping with the problems confronting Laos. Even though Hanoi's tentative reaction to right-wing takeover might be one of apprehensive caution, the chances of a sharp military response would increase over time. If the rightists were able to consolidate their hold on power -- and this would almost certainly require US support -- the communists would be likely to write off whatever hopes they hold for gaining a substantial piece of the political action in Laos. In this case, the communists would almost certainly apply additional military pressure against the rightist regime. If Hanoi believed that the rightist takeover presaged increased allied military involvement in Laos, the decision to step up communist military action would be likely to come sooner rather than later.

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ATTACHMENT

The Laotian Right: A Capsule View

Like most things in Laos, it is difficult to discuss the rightists without delving into the involved and complicated maze of relationships among the key families of the country. In brief, however, Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, as titular head of the powerful na Champassak family of southern Laos, represents the most important rightist figure. The na Champassaks are aligned with the rightist Insisiengmay and Nosavan families of Savannakhet Province. In 1960, Boun Oum assumed the prime ministership following a coup led by General Phoumi Nosavan (now in exile in Thailand). Presently, the spokesman for the na Champassak interests in Vientiane is Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insisiengmay. The major military figures in southern Laos, Generals Phasouk Somly and Bounpone Makthepharak, are also related by blood and marriage to the na Champassak family. As a result, the rightists exercise de facto control over the small part of southern Laos not in communist hands.

Another key rightist family is the Sananikones of Vientiane and central Laos; led by Phoui Sananikone, the President of the Laotian National Assembly

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and former prime minister, the family has important military connections. Oudone Sananikone is Chief of Staff of the Laotian Armed Forces, and both the mother and wife of General Kouprasith Abhay, commander of Military Region V which controls Vientiane, are Sananikones. Although the Sananikones have opposed Souvanna in the past, they are presently less critical of him than the southern rightists, in part because he presents less of a threat to the family's interests in the Vientiane area than would a regime dominated by the southern rightists.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

*Formerly
staff memo 8-74*

Most experts consider a successful rightist coup in Laos an unlikely event. Nonetheless it cannot be ruled out, and the attached memorandum considers some of the likely consequences of such an event. Certain conclusions are provided in paragraph 16.

This paper is primarily for your background use and we are not making further distribution at this time.

ABBOT SMITH

Director

Attachment:

National Estimates

Memorandum, dtd 18 Mar 71

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"Some Thoughts on a Rightist

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